



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

**Forest
Service**

**National Forests in North Carolina
Pisgah National Forest
Appalachian Ranger District
Burnsville Station**

**PO Box 128
US 19 Bypass
Burnsville, NC 28714-0128
828-682-6146**

File Code: 1950-1

Date: September 30, 2003

Dear Interested Citizen:

I have signed a Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004 Environmental Assessment on the Appalachian Ranger District. The Decision Notice discusses in detail my decision and rationale for reaching that decision. Copies of the DN and FONSI and Appendix E "Response to Comments and Issues" of the Environmental Assessment (EA) are enclosed. There are no changes to the EA other than the addition of Appendix E; therefore, final copies of the EA are only being mailed upon request.

For additional information on this decision or project, contact Linda Randolph, Project Leader at USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 128, Hot Springs, North Carolina 28743, or phone (828) 622-3202; or Karen Compton, Interdisciplinary Team Leader at USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 128, Burnsville, North Carolina 28714, or phone (828) 682-6146.

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, because no substantive comments expressing concerns or only supportive comments were received during the formal 30-day notice and comment period. Since this decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, implementation of this decision may begin immediately. Implementation of this decision is expected between the fall of 2003 and the fall of 2005.

Sincerely,

/s/ Paul Bradley
PAUL BRADLEY
District Ranger, Appalachian Ranger District

Enclosures



DECISION NOTICE
And
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004

USDA Forest Service
Southern Region, Pisgah National Forest
Appalachian Ranger District
Madison, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina

INTRODUCTION

The **Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004 Environmental Assessment** (EA) has been prepared which documents the results of site-specific analysis concerning a proposal to maintain wildlife fields on the Appalachian Ranger District. This Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) documents my decision to allow the maintenance of wildlife fields by various methods.

DECISION AND REASONS FOR DECISION

Based on my review of the alternatives and analysis in the EA, I have decided to select **Alternative B – Conversion and Maintenance of Wildlife Fields**.

I am approving any one or a combination of treatments 1-5 for 47 wildlife fields covering approximately 65 acres. These fields range in size from 0.3 acre to 5.3 acres (EA, p. 10). A summary sheet describing each field is included on pages 11 and 12 of the EA. Maps of the treatment areas are included as Appendix A of the EA.

1. No-till seed wildlife fields with clover/orchard grass, cool season grass species, or warm season grass species as indicated by the site conditions.
2. Prescribe burn wildlife fields to eliminate the thick mats of dead fescue.
3. Spray Glyphosate herbicide where needed for fescue control and field conversion.
4. Apply fertilizer and lime to wildlife fields where needed as determined by soil tests.
5. Plant soft mast shrub, apple, crab apple, or hawthorn species within wildlife openings.

Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004 Project

We will reduce impacts by implementing the following mitigation measures:

1. All prescribed burns will be executed during the dormant season (approximately November 1 - April 15) and planned for low to moderate intensity to prevent soil scald and minimize the possibility of soil erosion.
2. Brush barriers and natural vegetation will be used to insure no significant off-site movement of fertilizer and lime.
3. Constructed firelines in riparian areas will be constructed by hand to create minimal soil disturbance. Where needed to prevent erosion, water bars will be installed on firelines during construction. All firelines will be revegetated promptly after the burn is completed.
4. No herbicide will be applied within 30 horizontal feet of lakes, wetlands, or perennial or intermittent streams. No herbicide will be applied within 100 horizontal feet of any public or domestic water source. Exclusion zones will be clearly marked before herbicide application so applicators can easily see and avoid them.
5. Smoke Management Guidelines will be followed on all prescribed burns.
6. All prescribed burns will take place prior to turkey and grouse nesting seasons.
7. All applicable mitigation measures contained in the Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains (VMAM) FEIS issued in July 1989 will be followed.

I selected Alternative B because it meets the purpose and need for action. This alternative provides for maintenance of grass/forb openings for wildlife habitat. There are limited grass/forb openings across the district; therefore, maintaining the existing openings as quality wildlife habitat is desirable. Alternative B addresses conversion of fescue dominated fields to more desirable wildlife species, creates high quality wildlife habitat and provides for the elimination of thick fescue mats that restrict field access by ground dwelling birds and small mammals. The soil, heritage resources, aquatic, air, wildlife, PETS and human resources would be protected by requiring the implementation of the above mitigation measures.

I considered the no action alternative (Alternative A) but it does not meet the purpose and need for action. Under Alternative A, the wildlife fields dominated by fescue and covered with thick mats of dead fescue would continue as poor quality wildlife habitat.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The project proposal was presented and comments requested in the form of letters sent by the District Ranger on July 9, 2002 and April 15, 2003. Comments were requested by August 9, 2002 and May 9, 2003 respectively. Alternative B was identified as the preferred alternative on August 15, 2003 when the EA for Wildlife Field Maintenance 2003/2004 was mailed to agencies

and individuals who commented on the project proposal. A request for comments was published in the Asheville Citizen Times on August 15, 2003. The formal 30-day notice and comment period ended on September 15, 2003.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

1. The actions of Alternative B are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests (hereafter, Forest Plan) and the National Forest Management Act. The following paragraphs discuss my reasoning for the finding:
2. The actions of this project are consistent with the forest wide Forest Plan management objectives given in Chapter III and in the general forest direction. The project area is located in various management areas across the district. These actions are consistent with the management prescriptions and practices for these areas and with general forest direction.
3. The actions of this project are consistent with the Forest Plan because mitigation measures for impacts have been fully applied in the planned actions. The project is feasible and reasonable, and will result in applying management practices that meet the Forest Plan overall direction of protecting the environment while producing goods and services.
4. The actions of this project have met all requirements of the Endangered Species Act and all agreements with the State Natural Heritage Program, in that the impacts to Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, or Sensitive (PETS) species or critical habitat for these species are minor in scope and will not affect the population viability of any PETS species.
5. There are no known heritage sites within the proposed activity areas.
6. There are no significant irreversible or irretrievable resource commitments.

I have determined that Alternative B is not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I have considered both context and intensity in my determination which is based on environmental analyses documented in the environmental assessment.

Context: The actions of Alternative B are limited in context. Effects will not go beyond the local area.

Intensity:

1. Both beneficial and adverse impacts have been considered (EA pp. 2-8 and 15-22).
2. Public health and safety are minimally affected by the proposed actions (EA pp. 18-20).

3. No historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas will be impacted. Riparian areas will be protected by application of Forest Plan standards and state laws (EA pp. 5 and 6).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Concern expressed by interested publics over environmental effects have been mitigated through application of site-specific mitigation requirements (EA pp. 15-22).
5. The effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks (EA pp. 15-22).
6. This action does not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources (EA p. 5).
7. There are no apparent significant adverse cumulative effects between this project and other past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. Other Federal, State and private projects have been considered (EA pp. 5, 6, 17, 18, 20 and 21).
8. This action does not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The physical and biological effects are limited to the area of planned activity (EA pp. 15-22).
9. The degree to which this action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat have been considered. No direct, indirect or cumulative effects are anticipated to any PETS species (See EA pp. 20 and 21 and Appendix B of the EA).
10. This action does not threaten a violation of Federal, State or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. North Carolina Best Management Practices will be met through application of Forest Plan standards.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, because no substantive comments expressing concerns or only supportive comments were received during the formal 30-day notice and comment period.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Since this decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, implementation of this decision may begin immediately. Implementation of this decision is expected between the fall of 2003 and the fall of 2005.

Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004 Project

CONTACT

For additional information on this decision or project, contact Linda Randolph, Project Leader at USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 128, Hot Springs, North Carolina 28743, or phone (828) 622-3202; or Karen Compton, Interdisciplinary Team Leader at USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 128, Burnsville, North Carolina 28714, or phone (828) 682-6146.

_____/s/Paul L. Bradley_____
PAUL L. BRADLEY
District Ranger
Appalachian Ranger District

____9/30/2003_____
Date

APPENDIX E

WILDLIFE FIELDS MAINTENANCE 2003/2004

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS AND ISSUES

TABLE OF CONTENTS
for
RESPONSE TO COMMENTS AND ISSUES

	<u>PAGE</u>
General Discussion	2
Key Interest 1: Planting According to Site Conditions.....	2
Key Interest 2: Planting Shrubs and Fruit Bearing Trees	2
Key Interest 3: Serecia Lespedeza	2
Key Interest 4: Use of Imazapic Herbicide	3
Key Interest 5: Creating New and Enlarging Existing Wildlife Fields.....	3

Response to Comments and Issues
Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004
Appalachian Ranger District

General Discussion

The Forest Service received one comment letter during the formal 30-day Notice and Comment Period on the Wildlife Fields Maintenance 2003/2004 Environmental Assessment. This formal comment period began August 16, 2003 and ended on September 15, 2003.

Comments for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) indicated that they strongly support Alternative B because maintaining quality wildlife fields benefits game species, small mammals, songbirds, and butterflies. The NCWRC recognizes the importance of maintained grassy/shrubby habitats in maintaining the diversity within the National Forests.

KEY INTEREST 1: Planting According to Site Conditions

1-1 Comment: We support planting fields according to site conditions and wildlife habitat needs in the vicinity of each field. Preferably the plantings should consist of cool season grass/forb mixtures with native warm season grasses.

1-1 Response: Comment noted.

KEY INTEREST 2: Planting Shrubs and Fruit Bearing Trees

2-1 Comment: Consider planting shrubs and fruit bearing trees primarily around the edges of the larger fields to develop a transition zone/ecotone between the field edge and the woodlands. This “softening of the edge” provides important escape cover and nesting areas for numerous wildlife species.

2-1 Response: Comment noted. The proposed action allows for this activity.

KEY INTEREST 3: Serecia Lespedeza

3-1 Comment: Serecia lespedeza is an invasive plant that may be found in association with some of the openings. Openings with serecia should not be burned without first treating with appropriate herbicide since burning alone will stimulate germination of serecia.

3-1 Response: Comment noted.

KEY INTEREST 4: Use of Imazapic Herbicide

4-1 Comment: Consider using the herbicide Plateau because of its effectiveness in converting fescue fields. Plateau often results in more native regeneration in treated fields than fields treated with Roundup. Many old fields have a good seed bank of native species and using Plateau may result in more diverse forest opening. The NCWRC would like to see the use of the herbicide Plateau added in an addendum to this environmental assessment at some point.

4-1 Response: The Forest Service would need to do additional environmental analysis to consider the use of herbicides whose active ingredient is imazapic, such as Plateau, on the fields covered by this EA.

KEY INTEREST 5: Creating New and Expanding Existing Wildlife Fields

5-1 Comment: Plan for development of additional forest openings, as opportunities become available. Creating larger openings to benefit the golden-winged warblers should be considered.

5-1 Response: As mentioned in the EA (p. 7), the decision to create additional forest opening is outside the scope of this analysis. However, these suggestions will be considered separately.

5-2 Comment: Consider enlarging selected openings during timber sales and following up with prescribed burns to create “savannah” type habitat for songbirds requiring larger openings.

5-2 Response: As mentioned in the EA (p. 7), the decision to enlarge existing openings is outside the scope of this analysis. However, this suggestion will be considered separately.